

# Teaching Language Arts for Multicultural Education

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## Summary

### I. Preface

There is no country without teaching language in the world. There are about 3,000 to 5,000 languages from more than 200 countries in the world. Almost all countries consist of many nations, but belong to one country. Nevertheless, whereas some countries authorize specific one language as national public language, another some countries authorize several languages as national public language.

East Asian Countries such as Korea, Japan and China authorize only one language as national public language because of their strong nationalistic belief. But, there are many people using different languages in these countries because of international exchange, immigration, coming from abroad for study, and emigrant labor. Therefore language diversity also becomes important issue of education. Consequently, interests and intention about the importance of cultural knowledge and ethnic identity gradually increase in these countries, and also increase needs of multicultural education, as well.

Paying attention to this point, I would like to propose basic perspective about how one's own language education, especially teaching language arts in elementary schools should be performed in part of multicultural education. In this presentation, I would like to explain about language arts, learning language arts, teaching language arts for multicultural education respectively. I think this will be part of educational programs for mutual understanding between Asian countries.

### II. Language Arts

The language arts have traditionally been defined in elementary teaching as "listening, speaking, reading, and writing." (Cox, C., 2002, *Teaching Language Arts*; 1-18) But this definition is merely the tip of iceberg. Picturing the students using language in the classroom, their use of language was audible and visible: talking in small group or class discussions, writing in their journals or working together on a movie script, drawing illustrations for a book they were writing, constructing costumes or props for a play, singing, dancing, dramatizing, or laughing at each other's jokes. Other times, students' language use was silent and invisible: listening as teacher reads aloud, reading independently, or staring off into space, thinking about what they would write.

The language arts also include language conventions: spelling, punctuation, grammar usage, and handwriting. Newer skills such as word processing are part of the language arts, as well. An important goal of teaching language arts is improving language competence for all students. Language competence has been defined in Korean elementary teaching as "language arts, grammar, and literature." This is another

narrow definition. Nowadays, the meaning of language competence may include a range of abilities concerning to language processing, from bi-literacy to computer and media literacy. Currently many educators believe that teaching language arts should be student and response centered. Students should be actively engaged in using language and focused on meaning. It should stem from discourses including all language signs related to the thoughts, feelings, images, ideas and information. Why do children write about mother's work? Because family and culture are central to each student's life and they write best about what they know best.

### **III. Learning Language Arts**

The three theoretical perspectives that underlie the approach in this presentation suggest that learning language arts is an active, constructive process, a social interactive process, and a transactional process (Cox. C., 2002; 11~ 22). Each process will be explained with ideas about how they apply to language learning, teaching and assessing language arts.

#### **1. An Active, Constructive Process**

The constructivist theory views understanding and composing language as a building process. Children continually build new meaning on the foundation of prior knowledge they bring to the communication process.

Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget's cognitive theory of learning development contributes to our standing of constructivism. Piaget explains that all learning is an active process in which the learner continually constructs meaning. According to Piaget, young children learn to organize their experiences and adapt to their environments through the processes of assimilation, accommodation and equilibration.

Constructivism applies to *language learning* in four ways:

- 1) Readers actively build meaning as they read, rather than passively receiving messages.
- 2) The text does not say it all; the reader brings information to the text.
- 3) A single text can have multiple meanings because of differences among readers and contexts.
- 4) Reading and writing are similar constructive processes, rather than separate ones.

Constructivism also applies to *teaching language arts*. Teachers can help students learn these four skills.

- 1) to make connections between what they already know and what they will learn
- 2) to use strategies for reading(e.g., make predictions) and writing(e.g., draw on prior experience)
- 3) to think about their own reading and writing processes
- 4) to discuss their responses to text they or others read and write

Assessment based on a constructivist perspective should employ authentic, contextualized performance measures, such as students' self-assessment of their individual contributions to group work.

#### **2. A social, Interactive Process**

The learning theory of Lev Vygotsky proposes that children acquire new knowledge through meaningful interaction with other people. Whereas Piaget suggests that each child's learning is an individual, internalized cognitive process that does not depend on adult support, Vygotsky emphasizes the social, contextual nature of learning, which is sociohistorical approach. For Vygotsky, cognitive development was the result of social interaction within the environment. Assessment from a social interactionist perspective implies a close and mutually defining interdependency between assessment and instruction. This is particularly true of the idea of learning in a zone of proximal development.

A social constructivist framework also take into account the unique cultural aspect of each classroom as well as the role of the family and the cultural and linguistic background of each child. Learning occurs in particular context, which will vary from class to class and year to year. Culturally responsive teaching for language arts remains sensitive to each student's ethnic culture while helping him or her gain proficiency in mainstream culture.

According to social interactionist view, **learning language** can be characterized as follows:

- 1) The main function of language is social communication.
- 2) Learning is social and requires interaction with other people.
- 3) Knowledge develops first through social interaction and then becomes an internalized part of the cognitive structure of the learner.
- 4) Learning events must take into account the socio-cultural context of cognition, or daily life experiences

It follows that **teaching language arts** should have these goals:

- 1) to provide support as the child develops new understanding through social interaction
- 2) to mediate learning cooperatively with support
- 3) to be flexible, depending on the child's response to an activity
- 4) to vary the amount of support, from giving direct instruction to making subtle suggestions

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### 3. A Transactional Process

The transactional process, or model, of reading, which was developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1938/1995), focused on the active role of reader in creating meaning from text. Rosenblatt and other reader-response theorists (Beach, 1993) maintain that the reader and the text/author construct meaning together.

According to the transactional theory, **learning language** can be characterized as follows:

- 1) Readers and writers play active roles in the reading and writing processes.
- 2) Meaning is created during reading and writing in a two-way transaction between readers or writers and the texts they read and write.
- 3) Readers and writers draw on their own experiences and language skills to bring texts to life.
- 4) There are multiple possible interpretations of a single text.

**Teaching language arts** should therefore be rooted in these practices:

- 1) Students make choices about what to read and write.
- 2) Teachers ask open question and provide options for responding to literature and writing.
- 3) Students' voices and prior experiences are honored.
- 4) Instructional planning includes attention to students' ideas and experiences.

From a transactional perspective, assessing reading should not be limited to tests that assume the correct answers can be found only in the text.

## IV. Teaching Language Arts for Multicultural Education

As defined by James and Cherry McGee Banks (Banks & Banks, 2001, *Multicultural Education: Issues and perspectives*), multicultural education is

*a reform movement designed to change the total educational environment so that students from diverse racial and ethnic groups, both gender groups, exceptional students, and students from each social-class group will experience equal educational opportunities in school ..... A major assumption of multicultural education is that some students, because of their particular racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural characteristics, have a better chance to succeed in educational institutions as they are currently structured than do students who belong to other groups or who have different cultural or gender characteristics.*(pp. 429-430)

Today, classroom in some areas of northeast Asia are made up of students of many different racial, ethnic, religious and cultural group. To understand this cultural diversity, we need to understand culture. Student cultural diversity, as explained by Au(1993, *Literacy Instruction in Multicultural settings*), has three

distinguishing features: Ethnicity(national origin), class(socioeconomic status), language(whether a dialect of mainstream language, or a language other than mainstream language).

### 1. Models of Multicultural Education

The key ideas of the multicultural education approach may include the following(Cox. C.,2002;79):

1) Curriculum: Planning is still organized around the content areas, but texts and teaching materials are used that reflect the full range of experiences and perspectives of diverse cultural groups.

2) Perspectives: The material that has taught about a given cultural group should reflect perspectives that the group itself would choose and that show it as dynamic and active. To choose such materials, teachers must learn about different groups and discover what is important and meaningful to them.

3) Instruction: Teachers should assume that all students can learn, try to find each student's individual learning style, and draw on the extensive personal knowledge each student bring to school.

Schools that are rooted in the multicultural education approach reflect diversity and give equal attention to many cultural groups, regardless of whether they are represented in the school population.

### 2. Strategies of Teaching Language Arts for Multicultural Education

Here I would like to propose some strategies for teaching language arts in the multicultural education, especially in elementary schools of Asian countries. These strategies are basically rooted in improving language competence by experiencing directly significant language activities. Implementing directly speaking, listening, writing, reading, dramatization on their own/another language are activities for this goal, and a goal itself. This approach is highly recommended because these activities allow students to use and to expand on their own language and another language.

The main strategies of teaching language arts for multicultural education in elementary schools are as follows:

1) Verbal interaction in the pair/small group activity: Implementing verbal interaction between different culture students in the pair/small group. Teacher provides opportunities to allow student to use monthly their own/another language.

2) Language play: Teachers who support language play help children develop their own language competence and control over another language. There are some suggestions for encouraging playing with own/another language and words: synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, parts of speech, onomatopoeia, palindromes, similes, riddles, crossword puzzles etc.

3) Reading aloud: Reading aloud is one of the most beneficial activities that teacher do with school-age children. Choral reading, buddy reading, storytelling, reader's theatre, role play with different culture students are typical activities.

4) Newspapers in education; Exploring and reading newspapers different from mainstream language newspapers will be meaningful experience for each student.

5) Cloze sentences; Teacher may use a cloze technique for building an understanding of sentence patterns. In this approach, write a model sentence, omitting a specific type of word, and ask the students to suggest words that fill the position. This time, teacher may ask student from different culture to answer similarities and differences with their own sentence patterns.

6) Multicultural festival; Oral storytelling is important for transmitting the folktales, myths, and legends of different culture. This festival can be performed on their own festival day every year according to each ethnic culture.